

## My fascination with Christmas Lights

David Braun

I thought I would share my life long fascination with Christmas Lights, especially at this time of year.

I was born in Paterson New Jersey, and lived there until I was about 10. My Mother told me I had swallowed a flash light bulb as a child. Maybe this was the vaccination to my interests. Anyway, it started in my early youth. I remember my Father picking me up from Sunday school, when we got home, the tree had been trimmed, and I was so fascinated with the lights. (I still have some of those strings to this day).

Another highlight of my childhood was when I was walking home from school. Our next-door neighbor (Mr. Berbaum) was trimming his Blue Spruce Tree outside with lights. This had to be around 1950. Those lights that Mr. Berbaum used were "C-9" strings. In those days, the bulbs were made of a thicker glass, and they were "ribbed". The paint was on the inside. The wires were made of cloth. To this day, I have quite a selection of those vintage C-9 strings and bulbs.

(I must admit, I kind of forget my history of Christmas Lights, but I am going to take some guesses).

In the 1920's the technology was limited to "series" strings. The bulbs would burn in a "series"--- or dependant on each other. If one bulb should fail, entire string would go out. These particular strings were considered a nightmare to find the burnt out bulb on the tree.

These strings are called "C-6". The bulbs are pointed, and the glass is also ribbed or fluted, the paint was on the outside. There were eight bulbs in the strings. The filaments were actually 15 volts. Dividing the 15-volt filaments into the 120-volt circuit, gave the result for 8 lamps in the string.

I come from two generations of electricians. (My Grand Father actually wired the Lincoln Tunnel between New Jersey and New York, and my Father wired big buildings and hospitals). Their knowledge of those bothersome lights led them to add a 9<sup>th</sup> bulb in the string. This caused the bulbs to burn just a little more dim, but it extended life of the bulbs. Therefore, they would not have to deal with locating the culprit burnt out bulbs on the tree.

As technology advanced, the strings were made to burn independently of each other. Therefore, when one bulb would burn out, the rest would stay lit. I have a (framed) cover of the Saturday Evening Post dated December 14, 1935. The article shows the newer bulbs, and how they will stay lighted. The page is an advertisement for General Electric Mazda Lamps. It shows two women shopping for Christmas lights, and the caption states: “ *I insisted on G E Mazda Christmas tree Lamps this year. Last year, my husband was almost frantic changing burned out bargains, the colors were dull and lifeless too* ”

I will always remember my Uncle coming over to our house in Paterson, and giving me an old C-6 light string. I actually still have that, and use it every Christmas, as well as the strings from my Father.

There were a variety of bulbs made for the C-6 socket. There were figural, animals, and flower bulbs. These are very sought-after. I have a variety of them. A lot of these were made in Japan. The older bulbs used carbon for the filaments. In the later years tungsten was used.

Later on, Bubble Lights came on the market. I think this could have been in the 1930's, but 1940-50 were the most popular years. The bases of the bubble lights were made in the shapes of wafers, biscuits, and actually space ships. That time of course was long before our space age became a reality. Most of these bubble lights had an alcohol liquid in the tube. As the bulb would heat the liquid, it would then bubble. There were also oil bubble lights. These were made only between 1947-50. These are very rare, and worth about \$300 each on eBay.

I have two Christmas trees decorated in the house. They each have the Series C-6 bulbs. There are quite a number of bubble lamps on the trees as well. If you pass by, you can see one tree on the left, this is in my office. If you go more to the right, you can see the other tree just to the left of the piano (towards the back) it is in the living room. This also has lots of C-6 lights. Each tree has it's own 20 amp dedicated circuit. Each tree has 4 branches of circuits, and work on dimmers. They also have their own mini circuit breakers for safety.

Those strings were made better than the ones of today. The older strings were made in the U.S.A, the plugs, and sockets were all hand soldered. The wires are plastic. They should last decades yet to come. It's my guess that I have close to 1,500 bulbs, and several dozen strings.

About 1900 my Grand Father built a tree base that was carved from wooden cigar boxes. This resembles a white picket fence with green posts. I have used it each Christmas, and kept it on good repair. I built a similar one five years ago. This is used for the living room tree.

My display outside now has mostly LED lights. I have a lot of the older (outdoor) larger C-9 strings. But, I prefer to try and conserve some electricity by using the LED lights.

I always like Christmas, and wish that the excitement people have at this time of year could always be real, and last all the time! I have a collection of about 300 Santa Claus figures. These are in my office on shelves all year. I can be found on Facebook, and will be adding pictures of the trees, Santa collection, and the outdoor decorations by Christmas.

In closing, what prompted me to write this was the following:

I was working on my Haunted Halloween Grave Yard, when a neighbor and her daughter walked by. They stopped, and we talked for a short time. They were talking about the Halloween display, but then complimented me for the Christmas display each year. They said a lot of people look forward to seeing that.

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I then thought of Mr. Berbaum and the Blue Spruce. I know they are both long gone, but my memories of that day in my childhood will never vanish. I guess I am now taking the place of Mr. Berbaum, and the Blue Spruce.

I wish all of you a Merry Christmas, and Happy New Year. If you don't celebrate Christmas, I hope your particular beliefs will be meaningful.

The display is lighted at dusk, and turns off about 10:pm. It will stay lighted through New Year's Eve.

Sincerely,

David Braun  
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